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VEDIC WISDOM OF *RTA*, THE COSMIC LAW: ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN HUMAN LIFE

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Abstract: The basic tenets of advanced human living are found in the Vedas. Rta is the principle of natural order which regulates and coordinates the operation of the universe and everything within it. In the hymns of the Vedas, rta is described as that which is ultimately responsible for the proper functioning of the natural, moral and sacrificial orders. Conceptually, it is closely allied to the injunctions and ordinances thought to uphold it. The eternal law, while upholding the cosmic order, also produces beauty, symmetry, and symphony. Rta is also treated as cognate with satya (truth) and dharma (righteousness), which are laws that are common for both the divine and human. But there are subtle differences between them. The Vedas inculcate moral truth and dwell upon the importance of virtuous conduct. Rta, the divine law, is revealed in the Rgveda (RV), Śukla Yajurveda (SYV), Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda (KYV), Atharvaveda (AV), Āraṇyaka and Upaniṣhads. The term 'ṛta' is comprehensively discussed in the Vedas and detailed more number of times in the RV when compared to other Vedas.

Keywords: Vedas, Rta, Dharma, Satya, Cosmic order, Natural law

Abbreviations: AV - Atharvaveda, KYV - Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda, MU - Mundaka Upaniṣad, RV - Rgveda, SYV - Śukla Yajurveda, TU - Taittirīya Upaniṣad, YV - Yajurveda Received: 19 February 2023
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Introduction

The word rta is derived from the root r - its meaning in the Rgveda (RV) being 'to go the

right way, be pious or virtuous'. Thus, *rta* means 'fixed or settled order, law or rule'. In the Vedas, the word *rta* has been used quite frequently, but in

later scriptures its use dwindled. In its place, words like *satya* (truth) and *dharma* (righteousness) have been recurrently used, often carrying the same connotation as *rta*. In the *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavata* and other sacred texts, *rta* means 'true', and at times 'truth personified'.

Rta is the natural law or order that is the governing principle of the universe and its events. Even gods are not exempt from this law, which is described in detail in the Rgveda. The RV speaks of the 'path of rta' - 'rtasya pantāh 1 which we must tread. It also distinguishes between the ideal or perfect world where 'rta' is firmly established and which we must aspire for, sadanam rtasya ² and the actual or imperfect world in which we live that is characterised by the absence of 'rta' - anṛtasya bhurēḥ 3. The movement from the real to the ideal world is spoken of as the 'path of rta', i.e., the path facilitating the realisation of 'rta'. RV suggests that one of the most valuable components of this path is the praising of the gods and goddesses that represent and illustrate 'rta'. The Yajurveda (YV), however, substituted rituals and sacrifices for the praises, because actual performance was deemed more meritorious than mere verbal formulations or mental constructions (Rao: 1991:3).

Discussion

Rta as Dharma, Satya and Yajña

Dharma derived from the root dhṛ, which means 'to support', 'to prop up', is the individual and collective conduct that is regarded by common consensus as ideal and imperative. It provides direction to our actions, framework for the values we must adopt and nurture, and goals to be achieved within the limits set by the society. The word dharma appears at least fifty-six times in the hymns of the RV. There is a close link between rta and dharma, though they are not precisely the same (Rao: 1991:3; Sastry: 1989: (i)). Although rta is propagated as dharma in the Bhagavad Gita, dharma cannot be accurately translated into English or any other language. It is more

comprehensive than the word 'religion' or 'law'. There are more than eleven meanings provided for *dharma* (Apte:2007). According to Hopkins (1924:2):

The English word 'good' meant originally fit and so proper, appropriate. Similarly, the Vedic word *rta* means fit, orderly, good and as a noun *rtam* is the right order of the universe, of the sacrifice and of ethical conduct, the true way as opposed to its negative *anṛtam*, that is false or untrue. It connotes a certain harmony between ideal and practice. Cosmically, it designates the harmony of the world and regularity of nature.

Panikkar (2001:350-51) remarks that, "Rta is the ultimate foundation of everything; it is 'the supreme', although this is not to be understood in a static sense ... It is the expression of the primordial dynamism that is inherent in everything". According to the Encyclopædia Britannica (2020), rta is "the word from which the Western notion of 'right' is derived."

Rta has also been used quite often to denote, what is understood today, as dharma. In fact, later scriptures replaced *rta* with *dharma*. Here are some examples: 'paricinmartodravinammamanyādrtasya pathānamasāvivāset - let a man think well on wealth and strive to win it by the path of law and worship'4; 'rtasya panthāmnatarantiduṣkṛtaḥ - the evil doers do not travel on the path of the 'rtavākenasatyenaśraddhayāta eternal law'5; pasāsutaindrāy endoparisrava with words of law and truth, with faith and devotion, O Indu, flow towards Indra'6; 'rtamsamsantarjudīdhyānā - praising the eternal law, thinking straight (the sons of Angirasa held the rank of sages)'⁷.

In the Mahabharata, *rta* is used to mean 'truth' in general and also 'righteousness'. In the *Manu Samhita* the term is used to mean 'the right means of livelihood for a *brāhmaṇa*', as opposed to, for example, agriculture which is *anṛta* for him. Sayanacharya explains the term *ṛtasya* as, 'avaśyambhāvinaḥkarmaphalasya⁸', which means that *ṛta* is something that is the accumulated effect of good and bad actions. These resulting actions by *ṛta* is not like the inevitable cause and

effect relationship of the material world, according to which every cause would definitely produce an effect, but it is more like the successful harvest of a crop in which the farmer obtains the full yield instead of any other result.

The word satyam is a combination of two words - sat + tyat. The word 'sat' represents the three elements with form - fire, water and earth. The word 'tyat' stands for air and space, which are formless. These two words taken together form the word 'satyam', which stands here for Brahman considered as limited by the five elements and the whole universe made up of them. This is empirical reality. When one sees sat + tyat (satyam) as a combination of two sounds, it generates a significant meaning as described by Adi Sankaracharya in 'Śataślōki' (a book of hundred verses) (Sastri 2001). Here, he described that the Almighty has two forms having 'shape' and 'shapeless' (no body, only air or space). According to traditional knowledge, having a 'shape' (*mūrtam*) is 'sat' and 'without shape' (amūrtaṃ) is 'tyat'. The entire essence of the 'shape' is comparable to the solar disc (ādityamamadala) and the 'shapeless' core is one that spreads across the entire universe.

In the Vedas, *rta* has also been used to mean satya (truth) and yajña (sacrifice). Many scholars believe that these terms originally referred to one and the same concept - a belief that continues till today. The Nighantu- a Vedic lexicon - defines satya as having six synonyms, one of which is rta. According to this, rta is truth and anrta is the opposite, as in the mantra 'satyamidvā u tamvayamindramstavāmanānṛtam - let us extol Indra who is in truth, and not in untruth'10. This has made many general readers translate rta as 'truth', which is not always correct, as can be seen in the following Vedic mantra - 'satyam' bṛhad ṛtam ugramdīkṣātapo brahma yajñaḥ pṛthivīmdhārayanti'. These are the virtues that nourish and sustain this world: satyam brhat - the truth is great, rtam ugram - formidable order, $d\bar{\imath}ks\bar{a}$ - consecration or initiation, tapas austerity, brahma - prayer/spiritual exaltation and

yajña - sacrifice¹¹. The distinct use of satya and rta in the above mantra shows that Vedic sages gave different connotations to these two terms. Therefore, satya and rta do not imply the same thing in all contexts. The same principle applies to the triad of rta, dharma and yajña - they do not refer to the same concept, as can be verified from the following examples: 'śraddhayāsatyamāpyate - one attains the truth through faith' and this attainment of truth through śraddhā a unique concept never ascribed to rta; 'rtamca satyam cābhiddhāttapasodhajāyata - from the blazing tapas was born rtam, eternal order and truth' 13.

The value of *rta* is wider than the ethical value of truth. Of course in one verse, both *satyam* and *rtam* are said to be born of blazing, spiritual fire (*tapas*). Writing on the wider connotation of the term *rta*, Bose (1970:44) says, "*Rta* in its moral aspects, however, is wider than truth, it includes justice and goodness and is almost synonymous with *dharma* as an ethical concept. So *rta* is sternly (*ugram*) opposed to evil". Thus, *rta* here stands for the moral government of the universe which is very emphatically declared in the *Mundaka Upaniṣadic* (MU) verse¹⁴, '*satyamevajayatenānṛtam* - ultimately, the truth will prevail, never the falsehood'. Hence, *rta* as an eternal order has socio-ethical implications.

Various deities are the upholders of the rta. According to the Vedas rta was guarded by Varuna - the god-sovereign - who was assisted by Mitra - the god of honour - and that the proper performance of sacrifices to the gods was necessary to guarantee its continuance. The gods are great, lovely and victorious because they too stick to the immutable cosmic order. Naturally, social order must be modeled after this order in the universe. To gain worldly prosperity and also spiritual well-being one has to hold on to the law, both divine and social, which are but aspects of rta. It has also been perceived as the supreme reality in the form of *rta-sat* - dweller in *rta*¹⁵. It is not only an eternal law, but it is also an eternal justice. Bose (1970:44), therefore, differentiates it from the idea of 'fate' in Greek culture.

According to him, the doctrine of *karma* is the implication of this stern law of *ṛta*. But there is no pre-determination. There is a confident faith in man's capacity to follow *ṛta* in making order prevail against disorder, harmony against chaos. There is evil but it can be fought and fought successfully within us and without us. Thus, the Vedic outlook is both heroic as well as an epic outlook on life. Victory is ours if we are brave and follow goodness resolutely. Violation (*anṛta*) of the established order by incorrect or improper behaviour, even if unintentional, constituted sin and required careful expiation.

In a śāntimantra of the Taittirīya Upaniṣad (TU), we come across 'rtamvadisyāmi, satyam vadişyāmi - I shall call you righteousness, I shall call you truth'. Here too satya and rta are not one and the same. While commenting on this, Adi Sankaracharya differentiates the two by explaining that rta "is an idea fully ascertained by the intellect in accordance with the scriptures and in conformity with practice", and satya "is that which is reduced to practice through speech and bodily action"16. According to this explanation, rta is an ideal state, whereas satya is the state of actuality. For example, in a forest, a deer runs inside a sage's ashram to protect itself from a chasing hunter. When the hunter asks the sage about the deer, he replies that he has not seen it. Does this mean that the sage went against his morals? No, he did the right thing. This is rta, even though the sage did not speak the truth. Here, telling a lie to save the deer is still in accordance with the cosmic law. This is the difference between rta and satya. Hence, rtam is context-based and can change with time, but satya is unwavering. The schematic representation of rta, dharma and satya is depicted in Fig.7.1.

The importance of *yajña* (sacrifice), and its close connection with *rta* and *satya* is revealed in one of the *anuvākas* (passages) of 'Śrī Rudram' in the YV - 'may my truth and my faith, and my activities and my wealth, and my world and my glory, and my play and my enjoyment, and my children and my future children, and my hymns

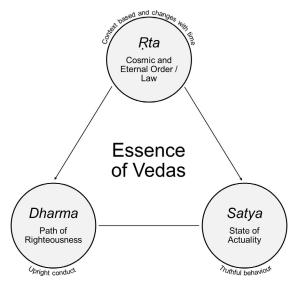


Fig. 7.1

and my pious acts prosper through $yaj\tilde{n}a$ or sacrifice'¹⁷. The power of truth and rta increases in the world through the practice of ritual/sacrifices. In the 'Puruṣa Sūkta' the very act of creation has been described as a $yaj\tilde{n}a$ performed by the gods and in which Puruṣa, god, himself is sacrificed. This mantra also suggests that though these three terms - rta, satya, and $yaj\tilde{n}a$ -are closely connected and by all means they are not the same¹⁸.

Rta - Eternal, Cosmic and Divine Law

Coming closer to understanding *rta*, we find that the Vedas use the term to mean the divine law that makes everything in the universe behave the way it should: 'be obedient to the rein of the law eternal, give us every blissful thought'¹⁹. The eternal law, in creating the cosmic order, also produces beauty, symmetry, and symphony. Living beings and the world of matter participate in a beautiful orderly life through the power of the eternal and sacred law, *rta*, working in and through them:

'The eternal law has varied food that strengthens; thought of the eternal law removes transgressions. The praise-hymn of the eternal law, arousing, glowing, has opened the deaf ears of the living'²⁰.

'Firm-seated are the eternal law's foundations. In its fair form are many splendid beauties. By the holy law long lasting food they bring us; by the holy law have cows come to our worship'21.

'Fixing the eternal law he, too, upholds it; Swift moves the might of law and wins the booty. To the law belong the vast deep earth and heaven: milchkine supreme, to the law their milk they render'22.

'The winds waft nectar (and) the rivers pour nectar for the person who keeps the law: so may the plants be honeyed for us²³. As mentioned earlier, Mitra and Varuna are held jointly responsible for the upkeep of the *rta*, (the natural order of the universe) for which they are praised by the sages. It is further stressed that both individuals and society gather strength by adjusting to *rta*, the divine law'²⁴.

'I worship you gods, holiest among the gods, who guard this all; you, faithful to the law, whose power is sanctified'25.

'They, true to the law, exceeding strong, have set themselves down for sovereignty; valiant heroes, whose laws stand fast, they have obtained their sway'²⁶. Here it is stressed that strength comes to one who is true to the law. And the same applies to social laws, of which the king is the guardian.

'God and his laws are inseparable, and by observing the injunctions of the scriptures one follows god's commands. This identity of the law and the law-giver can be further appreciated in this *mantra*'²⁷.

'Indra says: 'I exist, O singer! Look upon me here; all that exists I surpass in splendour. The eternal law's commandments make me mighty. When I rend, I rend asunder the worlds'28. This mantra depicts the sage filled with the realization of the Divine - here Indra stands for the Divine - in the form of splendour and *rta*; while later spiritual aspirants had the vision of the Divine in anthropomorphic forms. This concept of the Divine in the form of law is common to Judaism and Buddhism as well.

Another interesting hymn hints that god himself reveals the *mantras* in the hearts of the sages, and that *rta* - here it might mean 'rites' -

can be born anew. It seems that there is no end to the discovery of new laws pervading the universe: 'he reveals the hymn in the heart, let *rta* be born anew'²⁹. It is the divine that reveals the law to the sages, and these revelations were recorded and handed over from generation to generation for us to follow and practice.

Conclusion

Rta is the thus the eternal law that regulates everything. The Vedas praise benevolence and condemn niggardliness and selfishly catering for oneself. Thus, life must adhere to morals and a person must live in accordance to the eternal law that is innate in the universe. The Vedic hymns are not religious in totality because there are many hymns which are secular and treat of social themes. Their constant prayer is the prayer for a life of hundred years full of strength, health and wealth. Hence, the Vedas 'taccakṣurdēvahitaṃśukramuccarat declare: paśyēmaśaradaḥśatamjīvēmaśaradaḥśatam' - Let me see for 100 years, the lustre that benefits the gods and is revealed before us. Let me live for 100 years (RV 7-66-16); 'ādhīnāḥśyāmaśaradaḥśatam' - May we live for hundred years with our heads held high (SYV 36-24). In the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, there is a *mantra* that declares: 'ajītāḥśyāmaśaradaḥśatam'- Let us live unconquered for hundred years (TA 4-42); the AV says 'buddhyēmaśaradaḥśatam' (AV 19-67-3). The tendency of man is always towards high living and low thinking. If the thinking is sound, body remains sound. Evil thoughts exert a very bad influence on body of self and others also. They do harm to the thinker and the thought; so we should preserve ourselves form evil thoughts and always cherish noble thoughts. Lifestyle is the perception of a particular person or entire society towards life and it is the way people live, think and behave. In Indian lifestyle, principles of karma (action) and dharma (the righteous way of living) have significant value.

Rta, dharma and satya are laws which are common for both the divine and human beings.

Living beings and the world of matter participate in a beautiful orderly life through the power of the eternal and sacred law, *rta*, working in and through them. The Vedic morality and religious duties are basically rooted in the doctrine of *rta*. It stands both for order in nature as well as moral order in the universe.

The *rṣis* have emphasized the need to live up to the words and spirit of the scriptures for individual and social upliftment, both material and spiritual. And since everything in the universe is regulated by this principle of *rta*, it is the duty of the religious heads to keep an eye on the proper flow of the world order. Naturally, social order must be modelled after this order in the universe. To gain worldly prosperity and also spiritual wellbeing one has to hold on to the law, both divine and social, which are but aspects of *rta*. Whenever something is done against this universal rhythm it is considered *anṛta*, opposite to the natural law. This violation of *ṛta* destabilizes the inner order of things.

The Vedas consider gods as luminous, benevolent and right-minded divine entities.

The dual gods, Mitra and Varuna, especially the latter, stand in a special relation to *rta*. They are the most important among the Adityas, the guardians of rta. There are, however, some gods whose correspondence to natural phenomena is obscure. Given the naturalistic origin of the gods, rta as the order in the universe must also guide the gods. Precisely this is what the RV speaks of gods in relation to rta. Gods are intimately connected with rta throughout the samhita. The epithets like rtajāta (born of rta), rtajria (knowers of rta), rtavrdh (promoter of rta), etc., are frequently given to gods. What is more remarkable is that nowhere are the gods viewed as controllers of rta; They are the upholders of rta. The rta on the other hand is viewed as regulating order according to which even gods must conduct themselves.

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- 1. tānaḥstipātanūpāvaruṇajaritṛṇām|mitrasādhayatamdhiyaḥ|| RV 7-66-3
- ā yātuindraḥ diva ā pṛthivyāmakṣusamudrādutavāpurīṣāt|svaṇarādasēnōmarutvānparāvatōvāsadanādṛtasya|| RV 4-21-3
- 3. imecetārō anṛtasya bhūrermitrōaryamāvaruṇō hi santi|ime ṛtasya vavṛdhurduroṇēśagmāsaḥputrāaditēradabdhāḥ|| RV 7-60-5
- 4. $paricitmart\bar{o}draviņammamany\bar{a}drasyapath\bar{a}namas\bar{a}viv\bar{a}s\bar{e}t|utasvenakratun\bar{a}samvad\bar{e}ta\dot{s}r\bar{e}y\bar{a}msamdakṣammanas\bar{a}jagrbhy\bar{a}t||$ RV 10-31-2
- 5. pratnātmānādya ye samasvarancalokayantrāsērabhasasyamantavaḥ|apānakṣāsēbadhirāahāsata ṛtasya panthāmnatarantidukṣṛtaḥ|| RV 9-73-6
- 6. ā pavasvadiśāmpataārjīkātsōmamīḍhvaḥ|rtavākēnasatyēnaśraddhayātapasāsutaindrāyēndōparisrava|| RV 9-113-2
- 7. ṛtam śaṃsantarjudīdhyānādivasputrāsōasurasyavīrāḥ | viprampadamaṅgirasōdadhānāyajñasya dhāma prathamammananta|| RV 10-67-2
- 8. rājantamadhvarāṇāmgopāmṛtasyadīdivim| vardhamānamsvēdamē|| RV 1-1-8
- 9 tatsatyamyatrikālēṣvanupahatamadaḥprāṇadigvyōmamukhyamyasminviśrāṃtamāstētadihanigaditaṃbrahamasatyasyasatyam nāstyanyatkincayadvatparamadhikamatōnāmasatyasya satyam saccatyaccētimūrtāyupahitamaparamsatyamasyāpi satyam|| - Śataślōki 56th
- 10. satyamidva ū taṃvayamindramstavāmanānṛtam|mahānasunvatōvadhōbhūrijyotīṃṣisunvatōbhadrāindrasyarātayaḥ|| RV 8-62-12

- 11. satyam bṛhadṛtamugramdīkṣātapōbrahama yajñaḥ pṛthivīmdhārayaṃti| sānōbhūtasyabhavasyapatnyurumlōkampṛthivīnaḥkṛṇōtu|| AV 12-1-1
- 12. vratēnadīkṣāmāpnōtidīkṣāyāpnōtidakṣiṇām dakṣiṇāśraddhamāpnōtiśraddhāyāsatyamāpyatē- SYV 19-30
- 13. rtam ca satyam cābhīddhāttapasōdhyajāyata| tatōrātryajāyatatataḥ | samudrōarṇavaḥ||- RV 10-190-1
- 14. satyamevajayatenānṛtaṃsatyenapanthāvitatodevayānaḥ|yenākramantyṛṣayohyāptakāmāyatra tat satyasyaparamaṃnidhānam|- Mundaka Upaniṣad (MU) 3-1-6
- 15. hamsaḥśuciṣadvasurantarikṣasaddhotāvediṣadatithirduroṇasat| nṛṣadvarasadṛtasadvyomasadabjāgojāṛtajāadrijā r̥tam|| RV 4-40-5, SYV 10-24, KYV 1-8-15(30), 4-2-1(5)
- 16. rtam vadişyāmi|satyam vadişyāmi| TU 1-1
- 17. satyam ca me śraddhāca me jagacca me dhanamca me viśvamca me mahaśca me krīḍāca me modaśca me jātamca me janiṣyamāṇamca me sūktamca me sukṛtamca me yajñena kalpantām|| SYV 18-5, KYV 4-7-2
- 18. tam yajñambarhişipraukşampuruşamjātamagratah tenadevāayajantasādhyāḥṛṣayaśca ye|| RV 10-90-7
- 19. rtasya raśmimanuyacchamānābhadrambhadramkratum-asmāsudhehi|| RV 1-123-13
- Rtasya hi śurudhaḥsantipūrvīrṛtasyadhītirvṛjinānīhanti| Rtasya ślokōbadhirātatardakarṇābudhānaḥśucamānaāyōḥ||
 RV 4-23-8
- 21. Rtasya dṛļhā dharuṇāni śānti purūṇicandrāvapuṣēvapūmṣi| Rtēnadīrghamiṣaṇantapṛkṣaṛtēnagāvaṛtamāviveśuḥ|| RV 4-23-9
- 22. Rtamyēmānartamidvanōtyrtasyaśuṣmasturayā u gavyuḥ Rtāyapṛthvībahulēgabhīrertāyadhēnūparamēduhātē RV 4-23-10
- 23. Madhuvātārtāyatēmadhuksarantisindhavah| mādhvīrnahsantvōsadhīh|| RV 1-90-6
- 24. RV 4-40-5, SYV 10-24, KYV 1-8-15(30), 4-2-1(5)
- 25. tāvāmviśvasyagōpādēvādēvēṣuyajñiyā| ṛtāvānāyajasēpūtadakṣasā|| RV 8-25-1
- 26. Rtāvānāniṣēdatuḥsāmrājyāyasukratū| dhṛtavratākṣatriyākṣatramāśatuḥ|| RV 8-25-8
- 27. Ayamasmijaritaḥpaśyamēhaviśvājātānyabhyasmimahnā| Rtasya māpradiśovardhayantyādardirōbhuvanādardarīmi|| RV 8-100-4
- 28. abhiprabharadhṛṣatadhṛṣanmanaḥśravaścittēasadbṛhat| arṣaṃtvāpōjavasā vi mātarōhanōvṛtramjayāsvaḥ|| RV 8-89-4
- 29. brahmākṛṇotivaruṇōgātuvidamtamīmahē| vyūrṇōtihṛdāmatimnavyōjāyatāmṛtamvittammēasyarōdasī|| RV 1-105-15

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